

Selling Wholesale

A comprehensive guide to selling your work wholesale to galleries and gift shops.

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Wholesale vs Retail

The decision to move from selling retail to selling wholesale is a difficult choice and not one everyone wants to make. There are advantages to selling wholesale and there are disadvantages.

ADVANTAGES

- Cost Reduction Producing in larger quantities for wholesale orders will reduce both labour and materials costs.
- Justify Equipment Purchase Larger production will justify buying better equipment to improve efficiency and reduce costs.
- Steadier Income Flow Income flow is more consistent than when selling retail.
- Better Time Investment You only spend time making things for sale and don't spend time setting up and selling at retail shows.

DISADVANTAGES

- Lower price Wholesale price is usually only half of retail price.
- Intermittent sales Producing larger order can become boring.
- Credit You may have to extend credit terms to buyers. If you do, you will need be careful who you grant credit to.

Wholesale Shows

Wholesale Gift Shows are a lot different than retail craft shows. The public isn't allowed in. Admittance is restricted to wholesale buyers that can provide proof (usually a business or tax license) they run a business and are qualified to buy wholesale. You don't sell your product at these shows. You just exhibit it and take orders.

Wholesale shows can be a brutal experience for first time exhibitors. At retail shows, customers buy your work because they like it. You get lots of praise and rarely hear anything negative about your work. Wholesale buyers don't care whether or not they personally like your work or whether it's good or not. They care only if they can sell it at the markups they expect. Gift shops and craft galleries will expect to sell it for 200 to 250% of what they pay you. Jewelry shops might expect 300 to 400%. If buyers don't like your work, they can be direct, even cruel, in expressing their opinions. It can be crushing to a delicate artistic ego to stand in your exhibit booth hearing negative comments and watching thousands of buyers just walk by with no more than a brief glance in your direction.

If you do decide to try exhibiting at a wholesale show, collect as much information as you can in advance. Visit a show before exhibiting at it. Although you might not be qualified to visit, if you contact the show management and tell them you want to visit to consider being a future exhibitor, they'll arrange a special pass for you. You'll be allowed to see everything at the show, but your pass will clearly identify you as a visitor that exhibitors are not permitted to sell to. Exhibiting at wholesale shows is not cheap, but most shows allow for first timer exhibitors to take a half booth at half price. You can also arrange to split an exhibit booth with another artisan.

These shows are so big it's often impossible for a buyer to see all the exhibiting sellers. If you sell a handmade product, be sure to get a booth in the section specially designated for that. This section is usually juried to ensure higher quality work that isn't in mass production. Many gift shop and gallery buyers visit only the "Handmade" section at shows. They aren't interested in anything else. A warning about the jury system. It is NOT like at a retail craft show where jury requirement is often only ability to pay booth fee. The jury is concerned about quality but is equally concerned about price realism. If they think your prices are unrealistically high, you won't be permitted in. The prime objective of the show isn't for you to exhibit their work. It's for buyers to purchase stock. Wholesale shows are only considered a success if the visiting buyers find lots of things they want to buy. They fail when buyers complain about unrealistic prices.

Wholesale shows are usually held early in the year (Jan. or Feb) and late summer (Aug or Sept). Shop owners order in January for summer stock and in August for Christmas. They might not want delivery until months after the show, but that's when they make their selections. You might be disappointed if you call on a prospective shop in May expecting to get orders for the busy July and August season - and be told they've already ordered their complete summer stock.

You exhibit at a wholesale show to collect sales orders, but be careful that you aren't so enthusiastic you take so many orders you can't fill them. This is more of a danger then you might think. Many artisans have ruined their business by not paying enough attention to the possibility of taking on more orders than they can realistically fill. Your new customers will expect delivery in a reasonable time. If you fail to deliver when they expect, they'll not be understanding about it and you'll forever lose them as customers. Don't make promises you can't keep. Nothing will hurt your business more than acquiring a reputation for being unreliable. You want your business to grow, but don't grow it faster than you can control.

Consignment Sales

I'm generally opposed to consignment selling, but there are times when it can be useful. You can't expect a shop owner to buy very large, expensive works, or unusual works that might take a long time to sell. They will also hesitate buying from you until they know your work will sell. Placing your work where a lot of people will see it can be very good advertising. It might sell there, but even if it doesn't, many people will see it. More often, consignment is a poor idea. If a store buys your work outright and sells it, the stores markup is 50% or more of the sale. If the goods are on consignment, the sales commission is usually less than that but not always. A shop might less profit selling goods on consignment than it does buying and reselling them. Why would it do that? Either they take consignments because they don't have enough money to buy stock, or they don't know what to buy. They take whatever they can get just to fill the shelves. The end result is more limited sales. With limited sales, these shops are often unable to pay you even after they've sold your work. Consignment shops are notorious for going broke leaving behind a collection of unpaid suppliers. Your only advantage to consignment selling is that you might get a higher percentage of the retail selling price. You will be taking a huge gamble hoping to get a slightly higher percentage of a much lower sales volume - especially with the risk that you'll end up getting paid nothing at all. If you do place your work some place on consignment, be certain you know the owners extremely well and have a written agreement with them. If a prospective wholesale customer is nervous about trying out your product for the first time, it's perfectly reasonable for them to want the first order on consignment. Maybe a better way for you to respond is to instead offer the first order "on trial". Tell them that the first order is on a 30 day trial. After 30 days, if they

aren't satisfied, they pay for whatever they sold and return the rest to you. If they are satisfied, they pay for the total order - and you now have a permanent customer.

In all business dealings it's important to have a good contract and clear agreement. Some art galleries require such outrageously unfair agreements they even reject responsibility for anything broken or stolen while in their possession. For anyone that is selling on consignment or is considering selling on consignment, here's a contract form that is equally fair to both the artisan and the gallery.

Sales Agents

A sales agent (also called sales rep) is essentially a commission salesperson acting as your agent or representative to solicit sales from shops or galleries for a commission as a percentage of the sale. The commission is usually between 10 and 15% of the sales total on both the initial sale and on all sales from any customers the agent opened contact with.

Why use a sales agent?

Professional sales agents are familiar with various shops and know what locations your product is likely to sell in. They have built a solid working relationship with the stores they routinely sell to and can often get shop owners to buy your product when they might have rejected dealing direct with suppliers. Many store owners rely heavily on the expertise offered by the sales reps they buy from. Reps are professionals that specialize in selling. By using one, you can devote your time to where it's more productive – making stuff for sale.

How to find a good agent

The usual commission paid to a sales rep is 10%, but if you're only able to supply a small volume of product, a rep is likely to ask for 15%. It's important to take care selecting a sales rep. A good one can build your business but a bad one can bury it. The best place to find a rep is by asking store owners. Find a store that you think would be appropriate for your product, and ask they owner if they can recommend a good sales rep. You can also connect with reps at Wholesale Gift Shows. Most have a bulletin board for "Reps looking for lines" and for "Suppliers looking for reps".

What to watch for?

- Establish a clear agreement specifying exactly what the rep's territory is.
- Clearly define that all samples are to be returned when the relationship ends.
- Establish clearly what your sales terms are and when there may be exceptions.
- Establish clearly when you will discount (if at all).
- Establish clearly what the rep's commission is and that it's payable only AFTER the order has been paid for. Establish clearly that all agreements are cancelled if the rep takes on a product line in direct competition with yours or if the rep fails to put reasonable effort into promoting sales of your work.

How to make it work

- Be careful. Most agents are hard working professionals that can do wonders to help your business but some are bottom feeding slime that can do you more harm than good.
- Be professional. It's a business relationship. The agent's job is to sell your product. It ends there.
- Be firm. Set your rules and enforce them firmly with the agent and with your customers.

- Expect efforts to take advantage of you from both your agent and from the end
 customers. You'll get requests to sell on extended terms, you'll get requests for special
 discounts, you'll get requests for unreasonable territorial exclusivity and you'll get requests
 for consignment. Decide in advance what you will accept and under what conditions you
 will accept. Be strong. Learn to say no.
- Educate your agent. The more they know about you and your business, the more of your product they can sell.

Direct Call

It's not always possible, but making a direct personal call is almost always the best way to make sales contact. It gives you a chance to "scout" locations and select outlets that are likely to be successful selling your work. Nobody knows better than you where your work belongs. Take a business vacation and look for new customers. That could make the trip tax deductible. Don't be afraid to walk in and say hello. Sometimes the owner/buyer may be too busy to talk with you and you'll be asked to make an appointment to call back. If you plan to just drop in, take care to not interrupt the shop's regular business. Calling when a shop first opens is usually the best time to catch the owner/buyer with a few minutes to spare. Remember that smart shop owners are always looking for new suppliers – that's why they travel to buy at Wholesale Gift Shows.

Selecting a Shop

Too often artisans select the shop they would be pleased and proud to have their work in without wondering why that shop would want their work. Your objective should be to find a sales outlet that will benefit as much from having your work as you will by having them sell it. The relationship should be mutually beneficial. Symbiotic. Choose carefully where you want place your work.

Be realistic when you select a shop. If you're selling \$500. items, don't expect to place them in galleries that sell mostly \$5,000 items. Select a shop where your product fits and is most likely to sell, not one that you want your product in because it's prestigious.

When I choose a shop I reject any that already sell anything similar to what I make but look for one that has nothing like I make.

Things to consider

When you're prospecting for possible new wholesale customers to sell your work, you'll have the best response if you carefully select the outlet. Instead of trying for a few quick sales, look to build long term relationships. Visit the shop first. Examine what they're now offering for sale and decide if your work is a good fit for this shop. Some things you should consider when approaching a prospective buyer.

- **Price Range -** Is your work in the price range appropriate to that shop? Are you hoping to sell high priced items in a shop that sells mostly at lower prices?
- **Price Comparison** If your work is in any way similar to what that shop sells, how do your prices compare with the items they already offer for sale?

- **Quality Comparison** How does the quality of workmanship compare with that of the pieces now being displayed for sale?
- Variety -Instead of selecting a shop because it sells work like yours, do the opposite.
 Choose one that doesn't have anything like your work and would benefit by adding it as an extra offering for their customers. A shop owner is a lot more likely to want something different to add to their sales offerings than just another similar to what they already have.
- **Location** Is it a place appropriate for what you make? If you're selling western theme items you would be better in Wyoming than the Washington coast. If what you make has a nautical then, Newport is better than Nebraska.

Approaching a Shop

Shop owners insist you should always make an appointment before visiting. Every professional sales agent will tell you the opposite. If you call for an appointment the near universal response is some excuse to say no. Don't call in advance. Just show up. Walk in with a few samples of your work, a price list and a big smile. Ask for the owner or manager. Light up your smile and say, "If you're willing to spend just a minute or so of your time, I have a product line I believe will be a good fit in your shop". Some will say no but most will give you that minute or so of their time.

Make an Offer That's Hard to Refuse

Sometime when I choose a shop I sincerely believed would be a good fit with my product but the owner was hesitant to buy I made a special "30 day trial offer". I proposed sending them an assortment of my choosing to start with under the understanding It was a 30 day trial. At the end of 30 days they would then have two choices.

- 1. Pay for everything sold and return everything unsold.
- 2. Pay for everything I sent treating it as having been sold on net 30 days credit and we continue doing business with future orders of their choosing.

Roll Play Sales Calls

Professional salespeople won't hesitate to just walk in and say hello but many artisans are crippled with fear at the thought of doing it. If you're afraid of making a cold sales call or worried how you might handle one, practice doing it. You spent time practicing to learn how to make what you sell. Why not practice learning how to sell it?

Get a friend to help. Take turns. First you play the part of the artisan approaching a shop owner asking them to buy your work while your friend plays the part of the shop owner with a long list of reasons for not buying. Some of the most common reasons offered:

- Already fully stocked
- Coming into the slow season
- Only buy at Gift Shows.
- Not sure it will sell at your proposed prices.
- Don't think it's a good fit in this shop

Think of all the reasons a shop owner might offer for not ordering from you. Have a response ready for ever reason. Sales professionals call that "handling objections".

Now.....the key part of this roll play. Switch with your partner. They now play the artisan and you play the roll of the shop owner not wanting to order. This might sound like a silly game but it is VERY effective in removing the fear of making a sales call.

Special Considerations

If you expect a retailer to buy from you should expect to provide reasons they should buy from you and not buy from somebody else. Some things you might offer them as encouragement:

Provide an Assortment

Offer a line of product that is related - not just a random assortment of work. Eclectic doesn't sell well.

Product Consistency

Telling a shop owner your work is one of a kind is almost always a deal beaker with retailers that buy outright. The only ones that want one of a kind are consignment shops. Retailers that buy outright want assurance if they try a product, and it sells, they'll be able to get another just like the one that sold.

Price Consistency

If you sell your work retail on the internet or at craft shows, be sure you're selling it for the same retail price your wholesale customer expects to charge. If you sell for less than they do, you're undercutting them.

Exclusive Territory

If a shop owner knows they have the exclusive rights to sell your work in a specific territory they will put a lot more effort into selling it than if you're will to sell to the shop just down the street from them. It's a big world with a lot of different places to sell.

Return Option

A major concern with a shop owner is buying something that doesn't sell and being stuck with it. If you offer an option to return for credit (NOT for refund) anything unsold the shop owner will be a lot more willing to experiment with selling your work and taking a risk on some more expensive pieces.

Drop Shipping

Some shops are well equipped to ship purchase but not all can. You can offer to ship for them. The retailer sells the item but, instead of packing and shipping the item the customer bought, they ask you to make one to ship on their behalf. The retailer gets the sale but still keeps the item for display for possibly another sale. You get the sale. The customer gets their purchase delivered. Everybody gains. A smart retailer will often use an offer to ship to convince an undecided buyer to commit to buy. If they hear someone say, "I'm not sure how I can get it home" they can step in and offer, "Why don't you let us do it for you?".

Professionalism

There's no need to look like a big corporation but you should try to look professional and be professional. When you visit your customer, dress professionally. Don't look like you just came from working in the garden. Conduct business professionally. In business contacts it's usual to assume someone is reliable and responsible until they do something to prove otherwise. Unfortunately, everyone dealing with artisans has learned they need to do the opposite and start with the expectation they will be unprofessional, unreliable and irresponsible. I remember a shop owner telling me, "I love selling handmade work – but I hate dealing with the people that make it". Another once said, "If an artist or craftsperson tells me they'll deliver the order next Monday, be sure to agree which Monday". If you make a promise keep the promise. Be professional.

Selling Through Galleries

Many artisans want to sell through art galleries. For some that's a good choice and for others it's a bad choice. There are advantage and disadvantages

ADVANTAGES

- **Higher selling price.** Galleries are usually able to command higher prices. The more prestigious the gallery, the higher the price.
- Professional sales staff. Most galleries have staff experience and skilled at making sales.
- **Prospect contacts.** Galleries have built and maintain a list of prospective buyers they can contact to encourage sales.

DISADVANTAGES

- Consignment, not sale. Galleries don't buy outright but take your work on consignment. You don't get paid until the work is sold regardless of how long it takes to sell.
- Large inventory requirement. You need produce and maintain a larger inventory of unsold work. A figure that holds true for selling on consignment is the need to have and inventory of 4 to 5 times your expected annual income. If you hope to earn \$50,000/year from your work, you will need \$200,000 to \$250,000 in inventory circulating between different galleries.
- Not always professional. Many galleries are run more as a hobby business than an
 income generating enterprise. The owners won't put as much effort into selling your work
 as those that rely on the income produced from sales.

Approaching a Gallery

Where shops that will buy outright are usually responsive to you making a direct call, or will buy at wholesale shows, many gallery owners lean a little toward pompous and pretentious and get

upset if you fail to approach them in the way they want. They expect you to contact them in advance and make an appointment.

If you want a gallery to represent your work your first contact should be a short presentation to encourage them to let you show what you have to offer. Just asking for an appointment is unlikely to get you one unless you give them some reason to be interested. That should include a short version biography and some photos of your work with are request for an appointment to present your full portfolio.

Once you have selected a gallery you hope will represent your work, you need to decide how to approach them.

In person

If at all possible you should advance scout any gallery you want to approach and get a feel for what they sell and decide if your work belongs there.

Online

An email with attachments is an easy and effective way to make contact. This allows you to link to your website and could include your full Portfolio.

Mail

Sending your presentation package by mail is more work and costs more than online but is often more effective. The increased use of email has created a surge of junk for which we have all become skilled at instant deletion. We get a lot less mail so are more likely to take a few minutes to look at something in the mail. It also demonstrates you are willing to put more effort into your presentation.

My suggestion?

My first choice would be mail and second choice online – with both approaches designed not to convince the gallery owner but instead only to encourage. Make it a teaser. If they are interested they will contact you either for more information or an appointment.

Artists Portfolio

Take some time to plan and prepare your portfolio.. This is your chance to make your best first impression. Put some effort into making it special. There are different way to present your portfolio. Decide what works best for you.

Binder

If you decide to present print material, package in an attractive binder or presentation case.

Digital

If you have text documents be sure they are in a format the gallery can open. If you burn images onto a disc of USB drive put in them in a universal format like .jpg or .jpeg.

Online

If you have an online portfolio or personal website, take care to be sure it looks professional and is easy to navigate.

Your portfolio should include:

Cover Letter
Artist's Statement
Biography
Photographs.
Resume
Return Envelope

Cover Letter

Your cover letter introduces you and your work. Make it interesting but not too long. The most important part of the cover letter is to explain why you are contacting the gallery any why you think your work belongs in it.

Artist's Statement

Write it in the first person and keep it brief - 500 words or less. It should describe:

- Who you are.
- Why you do it
- What is your vision.

Many Artist's Statements are pompous, pretentious and little more than a compilation of babble jargon art speak nonsense. Take special care when you draft yours. It should be honest and honestly reflect who you are. Have someone else write your Biography for you but write your own Artist's Statement. Be personal. Be honest. Be real. Be you.

Everyone is different so every Artist's Statement will be different. I'm not a fan of them so for years resisted writing one but many of the shops I sell to kept pressing me to publish one. So I did. I made it uniquely mine.

"I like making stuff. It's fun coming up with an idea, drawing a set of patterns, then building something from those patterns. Is what I make art? I don't know. Don't care. Somebody else can decide that. I just like making stuff."

Biography

This is your artistic background.

- What art schools did you attend?
- What classes did you take?
- Where have you exhibited?
- Where has your work sold?
- Do you do private commissions?
- Have you taught?

Photographs

- Have them done in the highest possible resolution.
- Include only your best work
- Organize in groups or categories.
- Provide enough to describe your work but not everything you've ever done 12 or 15 is about right.

Resume

The Biography is about your background. Your resume is about your accomplishments.

- Awards
- Publications
- Exhibits
- Other gallery representation.

Return Envelope

If you make it easy to reply it's more likely you will get a reply. Include a self-addressed stamped envelope to make it easy and convenient to contact you and to return your portfolio if you want it returned.

Patience

Just doing good work isn't enough. You must be patient. Very patient. Take the time to make contacts and build relationship with galleries.

What to Make

That's an important question. If you hope to generate income from selling your work you must first decide what to make and hoping you can make something customers want to buy. You could decide you only want to sell what you like to make but that do that have learned it usually leads to building a large collection of your own work. If you want people to buy what you make you must offer them something they want to buy.

How do you know what people want to buy? In my Selling Your Work classes the most often asked question is usually "What should I make?". My first answer is "Not jewelry". There is already too much jewelry being offered for sale and the market demand for jewelry is a lot less than the supply. It seems everyone everywhere wants to make jewelry.

Know Your Market

After answering the question, "What should I make" with "Not jewelry" I suggest the following plan to help you decide what to make.

- 1. Buy a notebook. Any kind of notebook works but I'm especially fond of the spiral bound ones that make it easy to flip pages.
- 2. Buy a good pen. Don't go cheap. Buy a good one. You'll be using it a lot.
- 3. Take your book and your pen and visit all the outlets you can think of that make anything in any way similar to what you have been making or thinking of making. Visit gift shops, visit galleries, visit craft shows and navigate websites.
- 4. Make a list in your notebook of everything in any way like your products or your ideas. Make a thorough detailed list. List everything.
- 5. Return to your studio and read your list carefully.
- 6. Start making things that aren't on your list.

Why Is There Always Too Much Jewelry?

The market for selling jewelry is hugely competitive because there is always a huge supply of it. More supply than demand. More sellers than buyers. It's as if everybody wants to make jewelry. There are reasons so many artisans are attracted to making jewelry for sale

Perceived large market

There is a large market for jewelry. Almost all women and even many men wear jewelry.

Low materials cost

It's small so if you make jewelry you don't have to invest a lot of money in materials.

Easy to make

Some is difficult to make but most glass jewelry offered for sale requires very little skill and only basic tools.

Small

It's easy to transport – can usually be just carried in your pocket and shipped as a small package in the mail..

Gifts.

Jewelry is always a popular gift.

What Sells

If you hope to sell your glass art you can't assume because you like to make it people will buy it. Not everything sells. There is no simple easy answer to the question, "What sells?". Cheap sells. Good sells. Unique sells. If you hope to make things to sell cheaper than others do you're facing competition you can't start to deal with. You will never compete with Asian imports or factory production. The same if you expect your work will sell because your workmanship is superior. You set selling prices expecting to be paid for your time. You'll be competing against hobbyists who have no concern for how long something took to make or being paid for their time. They just enjoy the experience of making it and will often be happy to sell their work for just the cost of the materials. If you hope to sell your work, instead of trying to do it cheaper or do it better, do it different. Make something different. Things the cheap sellers don't make and things the hobbyists don't make. If you create something different that nobody else makes, you have no competition.

"The easiest way to win a race is to be alone on the track"

Big Market or Small Market

Perhaps the most common mistake artisans make is producing work for what they see as the larger markets. The problem with making things for large markets is there is almost always an equally large supply for them. If you offer work for which there are many more other similar options, why would a customer choose to buy your work instead of that done by someone else?

In the auto industry, the greatest market demand is for cars like Chrysler, GM and Ford. If you want a vehicle built by one of those companies there is a huge inventory available to buy from in a variety of models and colors. Lots of supply. Go the car lot, pick out what you want, pay for it and drive away. If you want a kind of vehicle for which there is less demand there is also less supply. If you want a car like a Ferrari you order one in advance, pay a deposit and wait for the car maker to build it for you. Even if you want a used one, you probably have to bid for it at an auction. Ask yourself if you would rather be building Fords to customers that expect you will always have a ready inventory or to customers looking for something special to be ordered and paid for in advance.

Artisans that make jewelry usually avoid working with gold because it's so much more expensive than silver. As a result there is lots of silver jewelry available to choose from for those that like silver to choose from. Not so much with customers that prefer gold. Usually, those that prefer gold are unwilling to consider silver. The market for gold jewelry is a lot less than for silver but so is the supply. With silver jewelry there is more supply than demand. With gold jewelry there is more demand than supply.

If you travel along the same road as everyone else you'll go unnoticed in the crowd. If you choose the road less traveled, you're more likely to be noticed.

Test Your Market

Don't assume because you like it means it will sell and don't assume because if sold in one place it will sell in other places. A product that sells super well in more place might do thing more than collect cob webs in a other place. Test different products in different markets to learn what sells. Retail Craft Show are an exceptional way to test markets.

Functional or Artistic

Many artisans think they should always make things that are functional. That seems reasonable but functional things are already widely available. If someone wants bowls or dishes or trays they can find lots to choose from at Costco or Walmart. If you make bowls or dishes or trays, why should they buy yours instead of the probably much lower cost ones at Costco or Walmart?

You might consider instead making things that have no function other than to be admired and appreciated. Functional things are more likely to perceived as craft than as art.

"People don't buy art to use as a fruit bowl"

Be Special

Perhaps the second most common mistake artisans make is trying to sell work that is easy or inexpensive to make. If you hope your work to be noticed you'll have to step it up to something above average. Some things you can do to be special:

Use Special Equipment

Make things that require special equipment to produce. Especially when it's equipment or tools you created.

Employ Difficult Techniques

Experiment and practice to invent techniques that take a long time to master.

Build skills

Invest time in mastering the skills needed to do exceptional work.

Do the extra

Put extra time into experimentation. Put extra time into finishing the work. Do that extra that can make your work special and distinctive. A good example of that is putting extra time into coldworking. What you do to class before at after it's in the kiln is often as important as what happens in the kiln. Coldworking is usually a way to turn average work into exceptional.

Create Unique Designs

Create your own designs. Doing good work isn't enough. Do something that is special and different than what others offer. Be original. Be innovative.

Embrace Production

It doesn't need be large scale production. A percentage figure that can be relied on is the "factor of 4". However long it takes you to do one piece, doing a dozen or so at the same time can reduce the time for each to a fourth or less. If your prototype took an hour to make, you can rely on reducing your time to 15 minutes.

Ignore the critics

The only opinion that matters is that of the person willing to buy it. Ignore the opinions of the many self-appointed experts.

"A critic is someone that owns a road map but can't drive the car".